

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 24. 10. 2024

Vlasta Styblíková

Her name appears in the credits of more than a hundred films. From the end of the 1960s until the 1980s, she was one of the busiest editors of the production company Krátký film, along with Alois Fišárek and Milada Sádková. She edited for Špáta, Schorm, and Vláčil. Yet she remains neglected during the attempts to map the history of Czech cinema – like most editors (and also sound engineers and other less visible people on the crew, whether they are male or female). Books and periodicals usually mention her only in summaries of those involved in the production, “edited by: Vlasta Styblíková”.

Neither did she give any press interviews. In contemporary reviews of the films she edited, her contribution is rarely highlighted. Moreover, the contribution is difficult to define due to the large number of people involved in the editing process (the credits of Drahomíra Vihanová’s documentaries, for example, list all the assigned editors, even though the final editing was usually the work of Vihanová herself, her being a trained editor). Her obituaries are untraceable.

The main, and in fact the only comprehensive source of information about Vlasta Styblíková’s life is an interview conducted by Eva Strusková in January 1997 for the NFA (Národní filmový archiv) sound recordings collection. Taking into account all the possible distortions that can occur in person’s subjective recollections, the following text will draw from the interview to offer at least an outline of what brought Styblíková to the editing table.

Vlasta Styblíková was born on 25th February 1927 in the Prague quarter of Holešovice. When she finished her studies at the local Masaryk School, the occupation began. At a private language school, she therefore had to study German in addition to English, the language she had been longing for. She stumbled upon another field, crucial for her subsequent career, by chance. Her friend went to apply

to a graphic design school. Styblíková accompanied her and found out that the institution also offers photography studies. She applied there and in 1943 she began to study photography.

She joined Barrandov a year later together with other students from her school as part of the forced labour programme in Nazi Germany. The Germans needed every worker with at least a basic understanding of photochemical processes to work in their newly established studios and laboratories. While her classmates worked on developing the negatives, among other things, Styblíková was in charge of editing them. She continued editing not only until the end of the war, but until the end of her career.

In addition to German and Austrian filmmakers, Styblíková also met cinematographer Jan Roth and director Martin Frič and thus became involved in domestic film-making circles already as a teenager. With so many new friends and colleagues, she did not want to leave Barrandov when, after the war, she was offered to edit news films for the Czechoslovak Film Chronicle (Československá filmová kronika). In the end, she agreed on the condition that her friend Miluše Bláhová would be hired for the same position.

After the war, the weekly news was edit in the laboratories in Vodičkova Street, as the original laboratories in Holešovice burned down during the Prague Uprising in May 1945. As one of the assistants, Styblíková primarily helped to edit the sound for the film stocks for the cinema chain Čas which screened various short grotesques, current affairs, etc. Among her colleagues were future documentary film-maker Jiří Papoušek and cinematographer František Sádek.

One day Styblíková took over the main editing of the audio tapes while filling in for her sick supervisor and proved herself, according to her recollections, as being so capable that she was reassigned to the dispatch department. Gradually she learned how to edit sound and picture and make a complete montage. Although her position in the domestic film industry was increasingly stable, she did not see her future in Czechoslovakia.

She had been considering emigrating to the United States where she could put her knowledge of English to use. The changing political conditions in the country had also

played a role. Eventually, she quit her job and actually went to the USA in August 1948. She soon returned, though. In the interview with Strusková, she explains that she found out that she could not leave her family. She was accepted back into the news film editing room on Wenceslas Square without any problems.

In 1951, Styblíková and her colleagues were transferred to Barrandov since there was a shortage of ideologically reliable people due to the personnel purges. Although Styblíková was not a member of the Communist Party and had been in the USA for a short time, she carried out all her tasks, including editing recordings of party meetings and propaganda short films, without any back talking. She escaped prosecution even after August 1968 despite the fact that she had participated in the editing of Schorm's secretly, illegally produced documentary *Confusion* (Zmatek) with material filmed after the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops.

Parallel to gaining practical experience, Styblíková attended evening courses organized by Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) from 1958 onwards, so that she would not lack theoretical knowledge. According to the Barrandov statutes, she needed to complete the lecture cycle to be promoted to the position of chief editor, even though she had already been working on the position for some time (while being paid the salary of an assistant).

In the 1960s, Styblíková, having been working mainly on news, advertising or science-popular films, became specialized in auteur documentaries which flourished in parallel with the advent of the New Wave. She edited films by Jaroslav Šikl and playful documentaries by her long-time colleague Jiří Papoušek. While many documentary film-makers were primarily concerned with the image, giving Styblíková a free hand when it came to editing the music and sound, Jan Špáta was an exception.

He thought about the visual and sound components simultaneously and paid attention to the overall aesthetic appeal of the films. Styblíková was one of the permanent members of Špáta's creative team, along with sound engineer Zbyněk Mader and production manager Máša Charouzová. In addition to Špáta and Schorm, she also edited works by other classics of Czech documentary, such as Miro Bernat, Václav Táborský, and Emanuel Kaněra.

During the normalization period, Styblíková, as a permanent employee of Krátký film, was associated with the new faces of Czech documentary, fresh graduates of FAMU. Thanks to this, she edited early films by Olga Sommerová and Helena Třeštíková. Not everyone was attuned to her traditional style of working with image and sound. There were frequent conflicts between Styblíková and Drahomíra Vihanová, who could uncompromisingly assert her own vision of her films and preferred to edit films on her own at night.

In any case, Vlasta Styblíková stayed in the editing room until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, despite the political and generational changes. Her last film was *Carpe Diem* (Carpe Diem) by Jan Špáta in 1988. The same year she received the Honorary Diploma from the Central Director of Czechoslovak Film. Still more or less invisible, reliably doing her job, yet indispensable for post-war Czech non-fiction film.